

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE  
11 January 1988

IMPACT OF CUTOFF OF US AID TO THE  
NICARAGUAN REBELS ON REFUGEE FLOWS

Summary

We believe that a cessation of US aid to the Nicaraguan insurgents would prompt some 15,000 to 20,000 guerrillas and civilian supporters to migrate to neighboring countries in the first six months after a cutoff. In our view, some 5,000 to 10,000 insurgents are likely to lay down their arms and flee mainly to Honduras with at least 10,000 family members and other sympathizers within six months of an aid cutoff. Many of those that leave Nicaragua probably will settle illegally rather than register with UN refugee camps; however, several thousand family members of Nicaraguan rebel combatants who have resided illegally in Honduras for several years may opt to join the camps at this time, while others are likely to seek to enter the United States. If the regime harshly persecutes its opponents or the Nicaraguan economy continues to deteriorate sharply, refugee flows would almost certainly increase sharply in the longer term. [REDACTED]

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This typescript was prepared by [REDACTED] Middle America-Caribbean Division, Office of African and Latin American Analysis. This paper was coordinated with the Directorate of Operations. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Middle America-Caribbean Division, ALA [REDACTED]

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### How Many Fighters?

We believe that the majority of the rebels will lay down their arms if US assistance--their only reliable source of resupply--ends, but possibly a third of those will settle in Nicaragua, many probably without accepting amnesty. The intelligence community estimates that 3,000 to 5,000 insurgents of the 15,000 reportedly inside Nicaragua at the beginning of the year are so committed to ousting the Sandinistas that they will continue to fight even if US assistance ends. We anticipate that up to 5,000 rebels--mostly common foot soldiers--believe they could return to their Nicaraguan homes at minimum risk; the balance, at least 5,000 insurgents, would probably flee to Honduras and Costa Rica. Six months after the cutoff, the flight of insurgent combatants from Nicaragua probably would drop to negligible numbers. [ ]

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A cutoff of US aid to the insurgents may cause additional Nicaraguans already living illegally in Honduras to flock to the UN refugee camps. State Department estimates that upward of 21,000 rebel family members have resided in the border area for six years or more. The rebel organizations, which have provided for the families' needs in the past, may be unable to sustain this assistance if US support ends. We estimate 50 percent or more would register with the UN refugee camps within six months in addition to any new migration from Nicaragua. Others are likely to seek to enter the United States. We believe many ex-combatants would try to join their families in the refugee camps, but in the past the Honduran government has expressed reluctance to permit former rebels to reside in their country. [ ]

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### How Many Civilians?

Many civilians who actively supported the rebels are likely to flee Nicaragua upon termination of US aid. We estimate that probably at least 10,000 rebel supporters and sympathizers would feel compelled to flee because of fear of government reprisals within six months of an aid cutoff. We also believe, however, that continued deterioration of the Nicaraguan economy and political repression under a consolidated Sandinista regime could cause up to 100,000 Nicaraguans to leave the country within a year of an aid cutoff. The intelligence community estimates that upwards of 50,000 individuals left Nicaragua in 1986, most going to Honduras and Costa Rica. Figures for 1987 are likely to be even higher. [ ]

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### Variables That Would Affect Migration Rates

While we believe the Sandinistas will continue their present policies of showing compliance with some of the provisions of the Central American peace plan, unanticipated changes in government policy could cause significant fluctuations in the number of people that seek refuge in neighboring countries. If the regime

is more tolerant of the opposition and enacts a generous amnesty program, more combatants may decide to resettle in Nicaragua and reduce the number seeking refuge in Honduras and Costa Rica by as much as half. On the other hand, if the Sandinistas tighten the conditions for amnesty, persecute civilians suspected of supporting the rebels, or detain rebels that have accepted amnesty in the past, the number of Nicaraguans--combatants and civilian sympathizers--fleeing to neighboring countries could easily double and the time frame shorten. [REDACTED]

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Economic conditions also would affect the number and destinations of Nicaraguans fleeing the country. If the economy continues to decline, we expect large numbers of Nicaraguans to migrate mostly to Costa Rica where economic opportunities are better than in Honduras. A catastrophic drop in the economy, either because of the loss of foreign economic support or complete crop failure, would almost certainly force very large numbers of Nicaraguans to seek subsistence even in Honduras.

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**SUBJECT: Impact of Cutoff of US Aid to the Nicaraguan Rebels  
on Refugee Flows  
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